

Visible Cities

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Jeju-ci

Jeju-ci lingers in the memory not for the fatty black pork or the old fortress; not for the wind off Mt. Hallasan; it is for the glance exchanged between the girl sitting backwards in the passenger seat of a Kia and the boy with dyed red hair carrying a violin. She stared at the violin, he stared at her bare legs. Then the world started up once more.

Seoul

In the shade of cartoon-character umbrellas walk old women with curly hair and heavy lipstick. They pass fashion boutiques, skin care shops, plastic surgery offices, and the young consumers of these extravagances. They prefer not to remember their tame youths. Instead, they look at the porcelain, plastic girls walking by on the street and imagine that these girls were them, the old women. The porcelain, plastic girls, underneath their mask-like sunglasses, think porcelain and plastic thoughts. They recognize the fashion boutique, the skin care shop, the plastic surgery office as necessary parts of their charmed lives. The future is this afternoon; it takes place at Châtelaine and Olivia Lauren. The future is tonight, and future me is prettier, has clearer skin, bigger boobs, double eyelids.

As the two generations pass each other on the street, the old women look back in time at the young women and the young look forward in time at themselves. Looking backward, looking forward, what's the difference anymore?

Fuzhou

Beyond the city of Fuzhou, past one hundred apartment blocks, one thousand trucks, and one million honking scooters, you find Drum Mountain. At the top, shirtless old men with guts and muscles smoke cigarettes and do push-ups. From up there, Fuzhou is invisible in its smog. Being unremarkable, the city hardly lingers in the memory. Losing your sense of direction, you might descend Drum Mountain on the wrong side and, having forgotten about Fuzhou, find yourself in a nameless rural village. Arriving in April when the tea leaves are being picked, a woman is singing while washing her hair in the creek, and the smell of ginger in oil makes you drool, the whole village glows even without streetlamps. It isn't so hard, at that moment, to convince yourself that you're not traveling, you're not lost...you're coming home.

This is not a rare occurrence, and in this way, the little village expands. The men take wives, they have children, they buy scooters. Fuzhou, meanwhile, empties. So in no time at all, the city becomes two cities mirrored across Drum Mountain. But since the smog is not so bad in New Fuzhou, anyone who climbs the mountain comes down on the new side. Of course, New Fuzhou begins belching out smog in no time. One day years later, you walk up Drum Mountain again and accidentally descend into the forgotten Fuzhou. You pass by the elementary school where you played wall-ball, the streetlamp where you kissed your first love in the snow, and the train station where you waited and waited and waited. Poor you: memories can only travel forwards in

time. Once they're gone, they're gone. You do not recognize the school, the lamp, or the train station. And so when you cross Drum Mountain the second time, you find yourself lost in a foreign city, a ghost town where even the ghosts are gone.

Tabuse

Elementary school kids in Tabuse wear the same uniforms, sure, but they also carry identical bags, wear the same color-coded slippers, walk underneath the same yellow umbrellas when it rains, give identical answers to prefabricated questions, and walk not just similarly but with exact, kaleidoscopic strides. At the piano, they can all play the first three bars of Für Elise but stumble on the E in the fourth bar. In fifth grade, every student will trip in front of their crush and stay up all night thinking about what an idiot they are. As they grow older, their lives branch out on the surface, but internally they grow in the same way. The mailman will feel identical superiority towards the man with the unkempt hair as that man feels towards the mailman because of his untucked shirt. Two lovers will be equally unsatisfied in each others' arms.

People in Tabuse are all unhappy. When they look into the eyes of others, the people of Tabuse see themselves reflected in perfect, dirty mirrors. Every bit of jealousy and insecurity is added and multiplied amongst the population. And there is no salvation for Tabuse: none of the people here are friends.

Hiroshima

Bomb city, I'm constantly reminded. Not by anything on the streets or the lack of old buildings. The old castle has been rebuilt. To enter a Thai massage parlor on the third floor of a whitewashed building I have to squeeze by a fat man wearing a white undershirt in a cloud of cigarette smoke. I dry off from the rain in a rank green elevator next to a diabetic taxi company owner. He's paying.

Bomb city, I'm reminded while the immigrant woman maneuvers around my body silently as if this is a sacred ritual. The diabetic groans behind the curtain separating us. In Normandy, my grandfather bayoneted a German. So he proudly said until when ninety-three and drunk he admitted that he had never been in Normandy, that he had in fact sorted papers for the shipment of boots between '43 and '45. She lifts the little towel barely covering me and rubs oil up my leg. I think about ceiling fans and ISIS and the bomb. There are big fans and little fans. Red fans and blue fans. When have I last seen a blue fan? She puts the towel back and cracks my toes. Bomb city. Crick. Crick. Crick. After Grandpa's death, my brother checked the U.S. Army records. He had been in Normandy after all.

Wenzhou

It's dismal. Concrete, gasoline, mud, sweatshops, raw sewage, brothels, the screams of women at night, heavy fists pounding on hotel doors in the morning. The governor has a row of chairs set along the walkway to his front door for when he gets home drunk and can't walk 100 feet without resting.

I've sent him letters, and he said he got them, but he hasn't said anything about them. Just one 'yo' sent on Facebook the night before he threatened to kill himself and said fuck you fuck you over and over again.

And the sun doesn't even shine here. The smog is thick. It seeps through my ears and deadens my thoughts. My spine is set in a curved vice. I slouch around and only look at the concrete, the mud, and the sewage.

I close my eyes and look up. It hurts, my back hurts, it is clamped in place and my eyes are forced back down. My eyes hurt but I think it's the smog. I buy a pack of Taishan cigarettes. I smoke three and then try to offer some to strangers to start a conversation but they avoid me, they don't look me in the eyes and I shuffle on, the vice tightening, my spine bending, my eyes fixed on the concrete, the mud, the sewage, the garbage, bumping into people in the crowded mess, trying to find my way to the train station to escape this ugly city, this pit. I reach the station but my wallet is gone.

Kyoto

City of ten thousand shrines. City surrounded by forest. Quiet city. Tourist city. City spared. She was lonely; she got up early and went to a temple on the Eastern hills. The Russian tourists were loud and ignorant and so she felt lonely and bitter and didn't want to see anyone. City of drums and festivals. At Nanzen-ji she walked along the aqueduct until all the sounds faded and there, suddenly, looking down at her from the top of a slope were three deer. They left; she followed them. City born of war. The deerpath twisted along valleys full of ferns, tall brown maples, carpets of moss, birdsong. She walked for three hours and felt okay again. City where at a baseball bar two men from Osaka, a woman from Fukuoka, and a boy from Chicago shared fried food and beer and laughed, laughed, laughed at how funny it was that of all the friends they would never have, these might be the closest ones of all.

Arles

Everything is closed in Arles. Walk to the Roman amphitheater and you'll find it under construction for the first time in two thousand years. The Van Gogh hospital is shut on Tuesdays for some reason. Drive a ring around the old stone walls—every gate is shut and bolted, plastered with colorful posters about a festival that will start very soon. The whole town is getting ready for this festival. It's whispered in the streets. Like a lidded stew on simmer, Arles is calm and hushed on the surface. But a flash of activity in an alleyway, a quick yelp from a second story window, a meaningful glance exchanged between two old men passing my one another in the empty square build up a deep tension. And slowly, while you're busy thinking of something like, "I wonder what the weather is like back home?" it starts—the sound of hammers. Everywhere it resounds. Every alleyway, every backyard, and behind the closed gates of the Roman amphitheater, it resounds. Everywhere—the sound of hammers, hammering something important and festive. But before you can find out what the great reveal is, you need to take the train to Paris. You have a flight to catch. Part of you wonders as you regretfully leave if the whole thing is a sham. Perhaps no such festival really exists. You haven't heard of anything interesting there and an internet search later

reveals nothing. But perhaps what you were seeing was actually the festival itself—a ceremony so old and sacred even its participants cannot see it, cannot understand it.